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The Language Exchange Programme: plugging the gap in formal learning

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How to cite:

Beaven, Tita; Fuertes Gutierrez, Mara and Motzo, Anna (2017). The Language Exchange Programme: plugging the gap in formal learning. In: Kan, Qian and Bax, Stephen eds. Beyond the language classroom: researching MOOCS and other innovations. Research-publishing.net, pp. 127–140.

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.14705/rpnet.2017.mooc2016.676>

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11 The language exchange programme: plugging the gap in formal learning

Tita Beaven¹, Mara Fuertes Gutiérrez², and Anna Motzo³

Abstract

In the context of distance language learning, speaking is frequently perceived as the most challenging skill; this paper reports on a 12 week summer language exchange programme providing students with new ways of practising their oral abilities. Students who completed an undergraduate beginners' language module took part in regular online, synchronous language exchange sessions with a partner. This paper analyses the impact of taking part in a language exchange task on the students' motivation. The mixed methods research included an activity perception questionnaire (based on Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994) to investigate the motivation of participants whilst undertaking a specific language exchange session, as well as qualitative data from both the questionnaire and the project discussion forum. The language exchange programme provides the opportunity for learners to take ownership of their learning and personalise it, and functions as a bridge between formal and informal learning. However, despite the enjoyment and interest provided by this type of experience, it is not without stress, and requires self-determination and autonomy to result in a positive and sustainable learning experience.

Keywords: online language learning, intrinsic motivation, language exchange, formal and informal learning.

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How to cite this chapter: Beaven, T., Fuertes Gutiérrez, M., & Motzo, A. (2017). The language exchange programme: plugging the gap in formal learning. In Q. Kan & S. Bax (Eds), *Beyond the language classroom: researching MOOCs and other innovations* (pp. 127-140). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2017.mooc2016.676>

1. Introduction

Motivation and self-determination are crucial to successful language learning (Dörnyei, 2003; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). The affordances of the new technologies and social media allow language learners to expand their learning beyond geographical boundaries and beyond formal learning settings. In language learning, examples of this expansion of the learning environment can be evidenced in the growing popularity in the use of new language-learning tools, such as apps or games, among others. Because of this new practice, there are enhanced possibilities for learners to personalise their learning experience by choosing relevant content and by embedding informal practices into formal learning (Hall, 2009; McLoughlin & Lee, 2010). This has implications for educators, whose role in this context becomes that of facilitating a personalised learning experience that fosters independent learning skills and self-regulation as well as supporting students in identifying effective resources to practise their language skills autonomously.

A language exchange (or language tandem) is a way for language learners to practise their skills informally: two people learning each other's language meet, either face-to-face or online, and interact for an agreed period of time in one language and then in the other, usually with no pre-established syllabus or activities (Ahn, 2016). Language exchanges have been a feature of language education for over 40 years and originally took place either face-to-face or by email (for an overview of earlier studies, see Voller & Pickard, 1996). However, with the advent of online synchronous communication technology, these exchanges now often take place online, using VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technologies such as Skype. Partners practise conversation, vocabulary, pronunciation and intonation, and develop their intercultural skills. Reciprocity is an important aspect of language exchanges, both in the setup of the session, and because language exchanges depend, to some extent, on learners creating opportunities for their own and their partner's learning that meet each other's needs (Ahn, 2016).

Tandems and e-tandems have been extensively analysed (Cziko, 2004; Lewis & Walker, 2003; Vassallo & Telles, 2006); other researchers (Brammerts, 2003;

Guth & Helm, 2010; O'Dowd, 2007) also discuss language exchanges as sites of intercultural learning. Research has also centred on learner-to-learner interaction and feedback (Bruen & Sudhershnan, 2015), motivation and engagement (Bruen & Sudhershnan, 2015) and the impact of participating in a tandem to improve language, intercultural and digital skills (Gajek, 2014; see also Pomino & Gil-Salom, 2016). As Dooly and O'Dowd (2012) highlight, a possible reason for the interest in language exchanges in so much recent research and practice stems from the fact that this approach enables the creation of spaces for intercultural exchange which combine the development of both foreign language competence and e-literacies. Moreover, such spaces also enable the practice of “multiply-integrated language competences, wherein learning is understood as an organic process, fostered through cognitively challenging, meaningful use of language” (Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012, p. 14).

This paper investigates the intrinsic motivation and self-determination of learners participating in a language exchange and the relationship between motivation, perceived competence, stress, and enjoyment in this context. Participants had completed a beginner's language course (up to A2 CEFR⁴) with The Open University (a distance learning university in the UK) and volunteered for the language exchange programme. In order to measure intrinsic motivation and self-determination, the study used research instruments based on a family of surveys created around the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan, 1982). Within self-determination theory, the IMI is a well-tested evaluation instrument used to assess participants' intrinsic motivation and self-determination. According to Salkind (2008),

“to be self-determined is to endorse one's actions with a full sense of choice and volition. When self-determined, individuals experience a sense of freedom to do what is interesting, personally important, and vitalizing, they experience themselves as self-regulating agents of their own behavior. Thus, self-determination signifies the experience of choice and endorsement of the actions in which one is engaged” (p. 2).

4. Common European Framework of Reference for languages (Council of Europe, 2001).

2. Methodology

2.1. Context

The programme ran for 12 weeks, and students were requested to find a language partner in order to practise their language independently. The recommended platform was *italki*, a language teachers' marketplace, which also enables users to find language partners for free (<https://www.italki.com/partners>), although students could also find partners elsewhere if they preferred. During the first week, the project team introduced the concept of language exchange and provided advice on where to find partners. They also provided some resources specially developed by the team to help learners prepare for and run the language exchanges. These were based around a collection of questions organised by topic appropriate for learners at level A2 of the CEFR. Participants had access to short weekly videos, some instructional (discussing effective strategies to conduct language exchanges) and some motivational (sharing tips on how to keep interested and overcome potential difficulties). An online discussion forum enabled students to share their experiences of the programme. No other form of formal language learning instruction was provided.

2.2. Participants

Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis amongst students who had just completed a beginners' course in Italian or Spanish at The Open University. A total of 31 students volunteered and were invited to complete a survey by email. There was a 29% response rate (nine students), with one incomplete survey, giving a total of eight respondents. Four of the respondents were studying Spanish and five were studying Italian. These participants only interacted with each other in the online forum. None of the language partners of these students were surveyed.

Respondents to the survey were equally distributed with regards to levels of education and employment. The most significant differences were in gender (six males and two females), age (two were between 46 and 55 years old, whereas

six were 56 and over), and ethnicity (seven white, one mixed). A possible meaningful parameter is the male-female ratio, as women represented 58% of the initial participants in the study, with only 16.6% of them completing the survey, whereas 46% of the men who started the language exchange responded. However, this does not necessarily mean that the attrition rate for women was higher than for men, as that was not specifically monitored in this study. In future studies, it may be worth trying to specifically track and analyse these differences (e.g. attrition rate by gender) in order to assess whether they have any significance in terms of motivation in participating in a language exchange.

2.3. Research instruments

The mixed methods study combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to generate data. To investigate the motivation of participants whilst undertaking a specific language exchange session, we used an activity perception questionnaire (based on [Deci et al., 1994](#)), adapted to the specific context of the study.

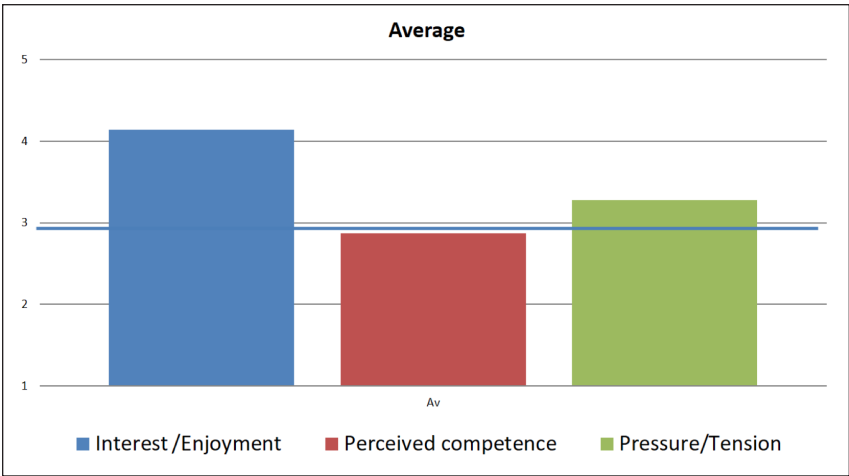
Like the IMI, the activity perception questionnaire includes a number of statements, linked to four thematic subscales. Participants rated their response using a five point Likert scale according to their experience whilst carrying out a particular task. The authors used only three of the four subscales in the original questionnaire: (1) interest/enjoyment, a self-report measure of intrinsic motivation ([Wigfield & Eccles, 2000](#)), (2) perceived competence, a positive predictor of both self-reported and behavioural measures of intrinsic motivation, and (3) pressure/tension, a negative predictor of intrinsic motivation. The fourth subscale, perceived choice, was not used in this study. Participants filled in the 18 item questionnaire immediately after finishing a session with their language partner in order to gauge their perception of the exchange and record their immediate feedback on the experience. Participants were also administered another, longer questionnaire based on the IMI at the end of the intervention to evaluate their intrinsic motivation; in this paper, we have focused on the open comments of that final survey. Both tools also had open-ended questions to allow respondents to expand on their answers and reflect on their practice.

3. Results and findings

3.1. Results of the activity perception questionnaire

Figure 1 shows the average values of the overall participant responses (n=8) in relation to the three subscales used. Numbers 1 to 5 on the vertical axis indicate the five possible responses on the Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 3 (highlighted with the thicker line) = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = completely agree). Interest and enjoyment, the main self-report measure of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985), scored 4.14, higher than perceived competence and pressure/tension: this suggests that overall, participants enjoyed the learning exchange session they had just undertaken despite feeling slightly anxious and perceiving themselves as less than competent.

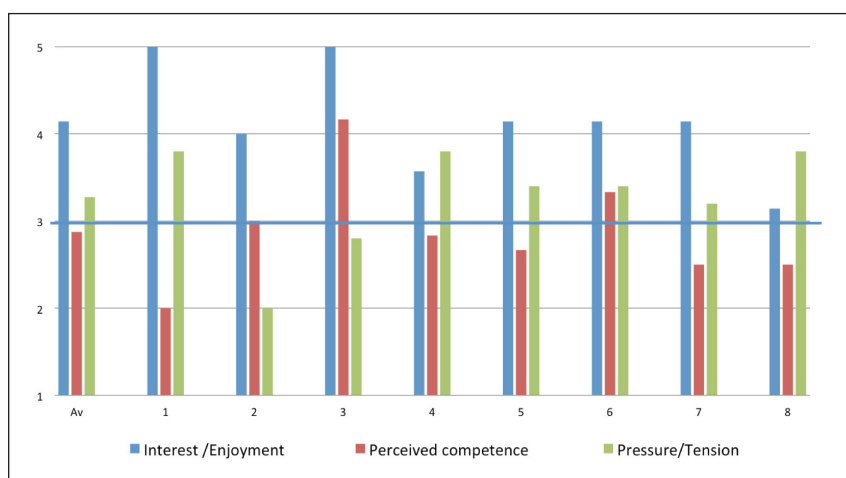
Figure 1. Average survey results for all eight respondents



However, as shown in Figure 2, there is great variety in the perception of the experience of individual respondents. Indeed, Figure 2 shows the same data as Figure 1, but the responses here are per student, rather than on average. As in Figure 1, numbers 1 to 5 on the vertical axis indicate the five possible

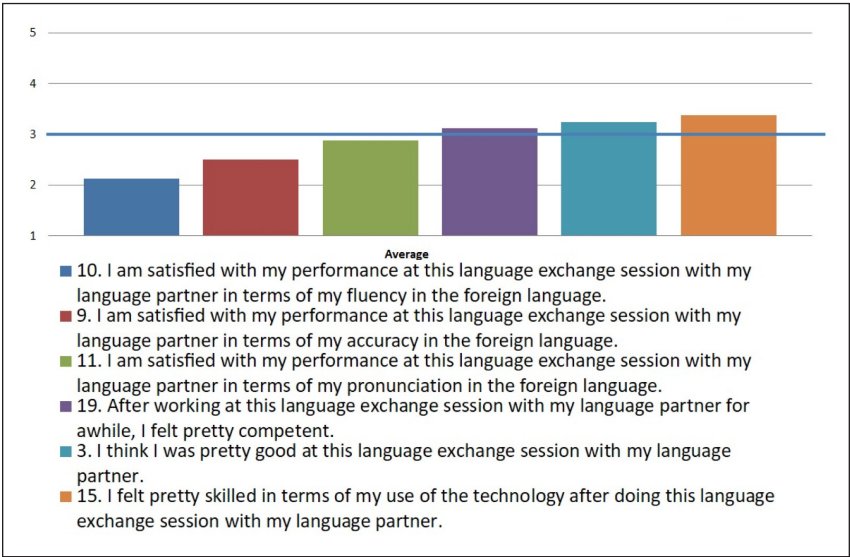
response on the Likert scale. It is evident that the majority of the students found the language exchange interesting and enjoyable (with Students 1 and 3 expressing the greatest interest and enjoyment). However, almost all respondents recorded greater than average levels of pressure and tension, indicating that the experience was not stress-free. Finally, it appears that there was no relation between the participants' perceived competence and their interest and enjoyment, with Student 3 feeling the exchange was highly interesting/enjoyable and also feeling competent in his/her abilities, whilst Student 1 felt the exchange was equally interesting/enjoyable in spite of not feeling very competent.

Figure 2. Survey responses per student compared to average values (Av), Students numbered 1 to 8



As shown in Figure 3, when it comes to perceived competence, participants felt less satisfied with their performance in terms of fluency and accuracy, and felt most competent at dealing with the technology needed to take part in the exchange. This is perhaps not surprising amongst students at a distance university who rely on technology for their studies but who have limited opportunities to practise their speaking skills with others.

Figure 3. Survey responses for the items on perceived competence



3.2. Results from open-ended questions

In addition, examples from the open-ended questions on the survey shed some light on the students' responses above.

What did you do during this language exchange session with your language partner?

"I had prepared two topics: (a) We discussed 'ferragosto'. What my languages partner did during the day. How people generally spent this public holiday. What traditional meals they have etc. (b) We spoke about my recent visit to Battle, I tried to revise names of shops, and speak a little about the Battle of Hastings. Unbelievably, this took up nearly 30 minutes. I asked many questions in Italian. My kind language partner replied in very clear and slow Italian" (Student 3).

How did you prepare for this language exchange session with your language partner?

“As we had to cancel the previous session because of Ferragosto, I used this public holiday as my topic for the next session. I mainly used the Italian Wikipedia (<https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferragosto> and <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle> (East_Sussex)) to find out more about the battle as well as the public holiday, its history, customs and traditions in Italian. I also used the website as an aide mémoire/‘filo conduttore’ to structure my conversation. The preparation took quite a bit of time (2 hours). I think this total immersion is very beneficial for comprehension” (Student 3).

What did you do during this language exchange session with your language partner?

“We spoke to each other in our respective languages. He is better at English than I am at Italian. We have exchanged short written texts by email and then sent each other corrections” (Student 8).

How did you prepare for this language exchange session with your language partner?

“Very little. I am unsure as to what would be the best thing to do to prepare. A little more guidance [...] on this point would help” (Student 8).

4. Discussion

In this section, we focus our discussion on the responses of two students (Student 3 and Student 8) who, as shown in [Figure 4](#) below, appear to have evaluated their experiences quite differently.

Figure 4. Comparison between average responses, Student 3 and Student 8

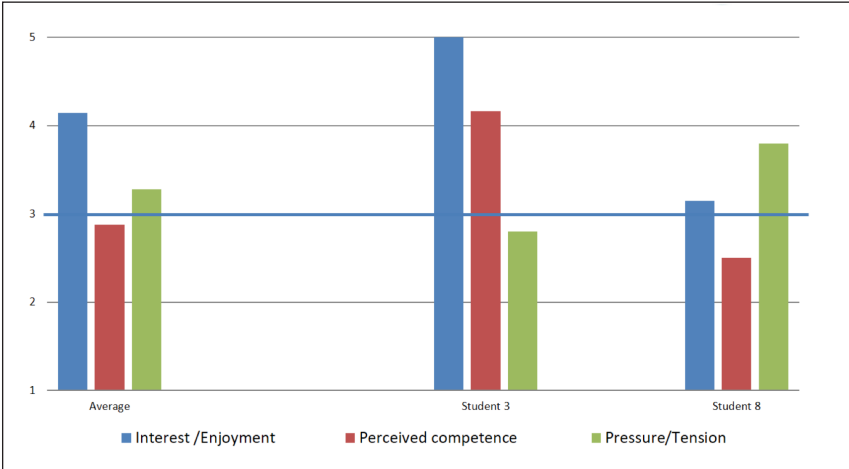


Figure 4 suggests that Student 3 had a positive learning experience; he felt fairly competent and any pressure/tension experienced did not unduly interfere with the enjoyment of the task. Conversely, Student 8 felt a high level of pressure/tension and this might have affected the level of enjoyment and his low level of perceived competence.

What is evidenced here is that Student 3 had a positive experience of this learning activity, which might be due to how much he prepared prior to the language exchange session. Student 3 showed a high level of autonomy and self-determination by selecting two relevant topics and setting time for preparation; he also personalised his learning by using topics that were of interest and relevant to him and his partner (Ferragosto is the most important summer event in Italy). Student 3 sought and found suitable resource material on Wikipedia, a process which enabled him to build up vocabulary and learn appropriate structures which he then used during the language exchange session. By doing so, we argue that his intrinsic motivation was reinforced by the experience: Student 3 demonstrated to be in control of his own learning and gave evidence of being a self-regulated and autonomous learner.

On the contrary, Student 8 did not enjoy the language exchange session as much, and we argue that his lack of preparation prior to the language exchange session might have contributed to him not feeling particularly competent and therefore tense. Student 8 seemed to be slightly overwhelmed by the perception that his language partner was better than him, rather than making the most of what such a situation can offer. Finally, although the research team produced a bank of resources to support learners, Student 8 thought there was not enough guidance, indicating that perhaps he had not engaged with the resources as much as other students, and that he did not have the autonomy to find his own resources for the session either. Furthermore, the analysis of other qualitative data at the end of the programme suggests that, although it was not an unqualified positive experience (one student said this sort of work, whilst interesting, was not really for them), three of the participants said that it had improved their confidence. Three students also remarked that they had found it a good experience despite it being slightly stressful, showing the importance of resilience in making the exchange a success:

“It started by being nerve-wracking and surreal but ended with it being really good experience. [...]” (Student 4).

“I really enjoyed the language exchange programme but was very nervous at taking part” (Student 3).

“Great fun, a real challenge, but I have been very fortunate in that my Italian partner is very keen to learn English, and is a little better at English than I am at Italian! It is still quite daunting at the start of each session” (Student 6).

Some participants reported on their intercultural encounters, commenting on the motivation of practising the language with a speaker of that language, which also provided a glimpse into their culture:

“I believe I have not only met a very nice person, but I am also learning Italian. This method of improving your language skills gives you a

direct ‘glimpse’ into the life of your language partner, his/her culture and everyday concerns” (Student 1).

“For me it has opened a completely new window into Italy and its people. It will inspire me to continue my Italian studies with more enthusiasm and drive” (Student 2).

5. Conclusion

Language exchange programmes can be a bridge between formal and informal language learning and practice. New technologies enable learners to expand and take control of their learning outside the formal learning environment, and personalise it.

This study sheds new light on the relationship between intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, and tension in online self-directed learning; however, it also presents some limitations as the sample was small. Our findings indicate that the adult learners seemed to find enjoyment and interest, and therefore motivation, in a task that they also found somewhat stressful, which we read as evidence of their resilience. As our analysis of the two students indicates, a regular language exchange is difficult to sustain without the ability to learn autonomously. Factors such as intrinsic motivation and self-determination, i.e. the ability to continue doing something that is ‘interesting, personally important, and vitalising’ despite the tensions this might produce, are likely to impact on the overall learning experience.

Future research could be conducted into whether younger learners or learners in other settings (e.g. face-to-face) also feel language exchanges are motivating and/or stressful, and whether they have the resilience to succeed in this mode of learning. For practitioners, there is also a need to develop strategies and resources to support their students in becoming better self-directed learners in order to enjoy the benefits of language exchanges.

6. Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Strategic Scholarship Fund, Faculty of Education and Language Studies, The Open University, summer 2016.

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Beyond the language classroom: researching MOOCs and other innovations
Edited by Kan Qian and Stephen Bax

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

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